

Interview with Douglas Griffin

«Self-organisation in companies is essential to do business»

EULÀLIA FURRIOL

With more than twenty years experience in business research and consulting, professor Douglas Griffin published *Complexity as the Experience of Organizing* together with Ralph Stacey and Patricia Shaw, a series of seven volumes including the results of their research. In this interview, Paradigmes asks him about the experience of bringing his theories to real life. «A new paradigm is coming up in the business world around self-organisation of companies, which is absolutely key and essential to understand how to do business», Douglas Griffin states.

Where lies the origin of your research?

I basically work with two more people, Ralph Stacey and Patricia Shaw, with whom I created the **Complexity and Management Centre** at the **University of Hertfordshire** in the mid 1990s, a consultancy service we outsourced. Then there was much enthusiasm about ideas like chaos and complexity studies. Ralph Stacey was among those outstanding people who had started writing about these topics in the late 1980s and he became one of the best known and most expert authors at international level in studies of thought and complexity, creating computer simulations. In working all three together on this subject, a point came at which we obtained analogies allowing to say that we were making progress and we were aware that we were ahead of very interesting conclusions, but we didn't manage to describe them in a straightforward way until we viewed them in simulations. These experiences also taught us the futility of long-term planning and the value of constant, open-minded exploration in order to be able to identify and explore the unpredictable opportunities posed ahead of us.

«Transformation is change from inside, when change comes out of one's own experience. This is the difference between transformation and decision to change.»

What had been your experience so far?

We all three had been working intensively for years in advising companies all over Europe and we were looking for models to go on trying. We were working with culture and cultural change, which was the core of our conversations, based on thought systems. But we had the impression that our research had come to a stalemate. And it was at that point that we discovered our complexity-based theory, and this encouraged us a lot as many doors were suddenly opening where nothing seemed to be before, which offered us the chance of looking at organisations from a different point of view.

Based on that, how did you come from research and computer simulations to real companies?

Patricia Shaw and I, who at that time were still doing consulting in rather general, wide topics, initially went on working in the management culture in traditional business. At the same time, based on the background of our thoughts, we had ideas on complexity we didn't expose to companies until we became convinced that they could be carried out. At that point, thanks to the fact that we were in contact with different companies where we had a certain degree of recognition, we had the opportunity of proving our theories in real organisations.

In this respect, the first pieces of work were the easiest as they were with top managers who trusted us. We exposed our theories and stated how they immediately corresponded with their experiences, and they were telling us that this didn't occur with the other common management theories. They were already aware that they didn't have absolute control over the company, that things were happening beyond their control. After that, other companies started showing an interest in our theories.

«Executives devote a great effort to explaining that what is occurring is exactly what had been planned, as they can't say: Of course nothing has occurred I didn't say but something different has, and now we understand it all much better.»

Which are in your experience the companies having understood your language best?

Understanding was immediate in working with pharmaceutical companies, for instance. Perhaps because they are used to live and act with uncertainty of what is unknown, because in their business the risk associated to the development of a new product spans across at least ten years. However, despite living with this experience, they devote a great effort to explaining to the rest of the company that what is occurring is exactly what had been planned, even if this is not exactly the case, which is

totally counterproductive. But they can't say: «Of course nothing has occurred I didn't say, something different has occurred, and now we understand it all much better.»

«What is really unique about the work we're doing is that we took the theories and the thought on complexity to the field of sociology.»

What is changing in your way of working in companies?

We'll never go to the company we advise and tell them: «We're going to have a meeting, call everybody who needs to be there according to the company hierarchy and structure.» What we do is proposing an initial conversation and ask: «Who do you believe should also take part in this conversation?» Then we ask these people: «Who would you believe it would be good to come to this conversation?» This is the sort of meetings we're having, and based on that we start developing initiatives.

On what occasions have you stated most clearly the gap between your way of understanding an organisation and the predominant view?

At one company where we were working there was an iron rule: all working meetings had to end with an action plan. We spent up to six hours behind doors and the only way of getting out was an action plan. In the beginning I thought it was very effective, but then I noticed that if nothing was done with those action plans, you simply had to have them as a façade as you needed to have an action plan to call a meeting. This way of acting is becoming more and more common in companies.

What experience could illustrate your approach?

In the beginning we had a consulting contract with a US group that was planning to expand one of its companies in Italy, together with reorganisation in Europe. Both Patricia Shaw and I knew the company well, and also the person who took charge of this new operation.



Douglas Griffin

Douglas Griffin, professor at the University of Hertfordshire and cofounder of the Complexity and Management Centre, provides new perspectives to understand the stability and change in the context of business organisation based on new features and creativity arising in daily processes. Not free from controversy, he suggests a radical review of theories of thought in business management. The scope of his work, complexity sciences, has many followers among strategic thinkers who follow him with great interest. The ideas of Professor Douglas Griffin go a step further than complexity sciences, focusing on thought systems.

The first idea of this person was to create a new management culture from scratch and he contacted the big American consulting firms. The group was ready to introduce a cultural change programme with a considerable budget for the initial audit as a previous step to implementing a very costly programme. In a conversation with the management team we were of the opinion that this was the wrong way, that there was no need of following the plan of the big consulting firms, that we could write right then what the outcome would be as it would be as general as they usually are. In fact, despite this, companies order these studies over and over again as they don't know how else to act. We asked them to allow us to work our way on a daily consulting fee basis we would collect as we would be making progress. We arranged quarterly meetings to explain what we thought we were doing and the only condition was to have them allow us to try and do things differently. And this is how we did it. We were given full freedom to attend any meeting of the company anywhere in Europe. Our goal was detecting where things were happening, and once the point was located we started having conversations with people from the environment in which change was emerging and new ideas created. Our task was to help them in identifying it and starting transformation.

How do you approach these meetings?

We talk of experiences we share and ask: «How do you perceive this?» Then we explain them our way of seeing it and ask them if what we

say makes sense to them. It's about being reflected in experiences. And this joint reflection intensifies this experience, and this is precisely what transformation is about.

Transformation is change from inside. This is the difference between intentional change or decision to change and transformation, which means that change comes out of one's own experience and becomes more possible precisely out of our way of thinking.

Is this way of acting and working especially important in times of change?

Yes, in a period of true change, of real change. For instance, in that company in Italy, there was a crisis when we were halfway with the project. And the reaction of the human resource manager was telling us that what we were proposing couldn't be done as they were in a crisis. So, completely opposed to how we pretended to work, they reacted like most companies: paralysing in times of crisis.

What does a company need to work in a self-organisation system?

It is not something that adds on or where you get to with certain action, but it's about realising what is occurring in the company at any moment and working according to that. It's a radical approach based on self-organisation and social interaction. It's a great paradigm, radically different from that of usual business management theories. The leadership paradigm is fading. What is really unique about the work we're doing is that we took the theories and the thought on complexity to the field of sociology.

«Our complexity theory involves a radical change of paradigm. It's about working with a more open concept, a different language from the usual one. The leadership paradigm is fading.»

EULALIA FURRIOL

Degree in Information Sciences from the University of Barcelona.

An independent journalist, she has been working for *La Vanguardia* newspaper for over twenty years and published in many media, among which *The Guardian*. She has worked at the press office of several international events such as the 1992 Olympic Games and different international meetings organised by the Department of Culture of the Government of Catalonia. She also collaborates with corporate magazines.

